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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

DECEMBER 1, 1867.

THE MUSIC OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH.

BY G. A. MACFARREN.

(Continued from p. 192.)

Not to seem captious in protesting against a fancy, which, however useless, might be proved to be as harmless, I needs must show the practical objections to the employment of Elizabethan notation specially for Church Services and Psalm-tunes, and the most evident proofs of the same.

While everyone is aware that the value of notes, as to duration, is wholly relative,—that no sign nor character can indicate the slowness or quickness of a movement, but only the proportionate length of the various members of each bar; there is scarcely a person in the habit of musical performance who is not, in spite of himself, of his better judgment, even of his daily experience, inclined,—one may suppose naturally inclined,—to sing or play semibreves and minims somewhat more slowly and far more heavily than crotchets and quavers, though the same beat regulates the time of the former and the latter method of notation. Such inclination is not lessened by the custom, very frequent in church, of alternating the performance of pieces written in the notation of Handel's time and our own, with others that stand in the characters of the earlier period of pieces, like the *Dettingen Te Deum*, written in crotchets and quavers, with others like the Service in F of Gibbons, which exemplify the stately white characters that in his day were common to sacred music and profane. A consequence of this inclination is a drawing, spiritless manner of singing, which resists very strenuous exertions to correct it; and a far worse consequence is that, being corrected, the tedious manner gives place to one more inappropriate and therefore more offensive, a manner of disregarding all the suggestions of written signs, distinct from their precise signification, and singing Services and Psalm-tunes with a gay, brisk levity, that is, to say the least, irreverent.

In testimony of the former of these ill consequences, let me tell of a choir-master in a country town, who spent as much pains as intelligence, and very much of both, in the endeavour to train his choristers to sing with animation the simple music chosen for them. Like many another prodigal, the more he spent, the less he got in return for his disbursements, and the less he was respected by his disbursees. In vain he explained the movement and the accent he required; in vain he beat the time; he might have murdered it outright before his sluggish disciples would have sympathised with its maltreatment, would have foregone their prejudice that a minim was a long note and should, in reason, be sung slowly. My acquaintance, the choir-master, struck upon the device of transcribing the Psalm-tunes for a certain Sunday in crotchets instead of minims, and with four instead of two in a bar. He had no special rehearsal, but gave the parts into the hands of his executants only at the moment of performance, and the music was sung at the speed and with all the emphasis he had fruitlessly striven to obtain at his yesterday's practice.

It must be admitted also as a testimony equally strong, though of a different character, of that evil consequence of Handel's *Messiah* divide the chorus "And with His stripes," into half-bars—this having been first printed with four minims in a bar, but appearing in all our reprints with double the original number of bars, and with but two minims in each. Here is surely sign sufficient of the inconvenience of the original notation, in the attempt at its improvement.

In further testimony of that ill consequence, let me adduce the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Mendelssohn wrote in *tempo alla breve*, with two groups of four quavers in a bar. In this form are the score and the separate orchestral parts printed; but the author complained always of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of animating a band, particularly in England, with the feeling he wished to be embodied in the music. Accordingly, when he arranged the work for publication, as a pianoforte duet, he changed the quavers of the original into semiquavers, and wrote four groups instead of two in each bar, and thus he secured a true comprehension, and, where executancy was adequate, a correct interpretation of his meaning.

Let me add yet more to the testimony I have drawn from Church and concert experience. The instrumental Allegro, in the same composer's *Hymn of Praise*, stands in the original score—from which the work was performed at the Leipsic Commemoration of the four hundredth centenary of the invention of printing, and at the Birmingham Festival, both in 1840—as was the Overture just noticed, in the assumed ecclesiastical notation of two minims in a bar; but, in the re-written and published score,—from which the work was first performed at a concert in the Gewandhaus, in the December of the same year—this Allegro has undergone the same metamorphosis as the aforesaid Overture. Exactly the same is the case with the Chorus, "Praise the Lord with lute and harp," in the same work; and an even more remarkable change from white to black notation has been effected in the subsequent Chorus, "O give thanks," which was first written with four minims in a bar, but was remodelled to retain the same accentuation, but to halve the length of the notes it having now still four in a bar, but four crotchets instead of four minims. Can it be pretended that these troublesome variations, which involved the entire rewriting of each of the long movements I have quoted, resulted from a mere whim of the composer? Certainly not with any colour of plausibility; they are the obvious result of an experience of the bad working of the cumbrous notation originally employed.

I must yet further instance the occasional orchestral compositions of recent masters, wherein to suggest to the performers a peculiar gravity and breadth of style, the antiquated measures of $\frac{3}{2}$ and $\frac{5}{4}$ are employed. These definitely prove that the musicians who wrote them felt there to be something in the appearance of the music indicative of the effect they desired from it, and of the manner of playing by which this was to be produced. It will suffice to name the Overture to the *Ruler of the Spirits*, of Weber; the first movement of Spohr's Symphony in D minor; the introduction to his Overture to *Jessonda*; and the Overture to *Melusine*, of Mendelssohn. Other pieces in $\frac{3}{2}$ or in $\frac{5}{4}$, may be intended to be played as quickly or as slowly

as these; but the members of an orchestra recognise the indication of a particular character of boldness or grandeur in the ancient notation which the forms of more frequent modern use would less surely suggest. The large triple measure, with three several accents and each division of the bar subdivided into groups of shorter notes, as exemplified in the broad, exultant, heart outpouring Air of Iphis in Handel's *Jephtha*, "Tune the soft melodious lute," is insusceptible of signification by any means intelligible to the eye, other than the measure of $\frac{3}{4}$ employed by the composer; since the notation of semiquavers and demisemiquavers would fail to express the amplitude of manner necessary for the embodiment of this peculiar rhythm. Such instances may arise as this, in church no less than in lay music, though but rarely in either; such exceptional character, too, as that of the instrumental pieces noted above, may distinguish special ecclesiastical compositions; and, in these cases, the peculiar notation is as appropriate to music for use within, as beyond, the sanctuary—but in these cases only.

In testimony of the later of the ill consequences of people's inclination to sing minims positively slow, instead of relatively longer than some other notes,—the consequence of the correction of this irresistible, if unjustifiable, inclination,—let me refer to the growing practice of singing Psalm-tunes especially, but some other portions likewise of the Church Service, at a speed most unseemly for pious strains, and with as little emphasis as solemnity. There is no warrant for this bustling liveliness of manner in any record of ancient usage, and it has no support in the effect it works in modern practice; many an earnest man is scandalised by the unfitness herein of the manner to the matter, and too many others give way to the flippancy, and, whatever impression else it makes on them, esteem it as at least a happy method of getting quickly over the ground.

There might be some seeming consistency in the preservation to Church use of the Elizabethan musical characters, were the Elizabethan musical style permanently appropriated also to ecclesiastical purposes; and in preserving it for the notation of Service music, exclusively written according to the theory which prevailed during the reign of our virgin Queen. Church music has, however, I have already shown, been composed in every successive age according to the style prevalent in that age; and now, when the music written for the Church abounds in the extremist modernisms, when all the beauties and all the vices of the chromatic style are pressed into Church use, there is strange incongruity, if nothing worse, in putting the new wine of these very modern ideas into the old bottles of that ancient notation. Is it not as though the popular slang of the fast young gentlemen of the present day, and too many, alas! of the fast young ladies, should be printed as a rule—if printed at all—in the quaint old type and the obsolete orthography of the first folio of Shakspeare, or even of the Prayer Book of Edward VI., and this because it emanates, for the most part, from our Clerical Universities?

There may be retorted against me that my own practice contradicts the principles I have here sought to enunciate. I own to a composition that is printed in the notation of breves, semibreves, and minim; a portion of which, that as the accent of two dotted notes in a bar,—imperfect of the first, and perfect of the second division, to use the ancient

terms—stands in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, each bar representing half a measure, because in the natural rhythm of $\frac{4}{4}$, the grouping of the crotchets failed to indicate the division of the accent. When this was published, I was under the impression that the shape of the notes in Church music, no less than the styles of the thoughts, should differ from that employed in secular writing. I can only reply that I hold true consistency to be a constant perseverance in the pursuit of right; that formerly I held this notation to be good for the purpose, that now I believe the other to be better, and that I am consistent, therefore, in renouncing my old views for my new convictions. Further, I acknowledge to the authorship of some hymn tunes, which have been transcribed from crotchets into minims, and the like, by the editors of the collections wherein they appear; who, consequently, are responsible, and not I, for the aspect these pieces bear before the world.

It is time to pass from this disquisition on notes to a consideration of the matter noted. My firm opinion once was, that the style of Church music should differ essentially from that of the music of the laity, referring the word style to the wide theoretical distinction between the strict contrapuntal rules of diatonic composition, and the free harmonic laws of chromatic writing. I may scarcely be explicit—to those, at least, to whom I have not had the good fortune already to explain my views—if I rehearse not in brief the particulars of these distinctions; so, for clearness sake, I trust that repetition may be pardoned. In general terms, the rules of the ancient style in music may be summed up as binding all the notes of a key to the same treatment; as allowing no inflections of the diatonic scale of whatever key may for the time prevail; as admitting no unprepared discords whatever, save only passing notes, and demanding that these unprepared passing notes be always at an unaccented part of the measure; and as counting the interval of the 4th from the bass unexceptionally among the discords, and prohibiting thus the use of the second inversion of concords save only if it occur upon a pedal bass. The laws of the modern style on the other hand exact an exceptional treatment of the leading note, and concede as much to the dominant, the tonic, and sub-dominant, with the chords that spring from these three latter notes in a key; they allow the use of chromatic notes which affect not the tonality; they admit the employment of particular unprepared discords, chief among which, in frequency of occurrence and in familiarity to all hearers, stands the chord of the dominant 7th, and, little less common, are passing notes—or notes foreign to the harmony—upon strongly accented parts of the measure; and they acknowledge the 4th from the bass, when this is an inverted 5th, to be a concord, and thus authorise the free use of the second inversion of certain chords. A comparison of these distinctions and of the diverse principles they define will show, to any one versed in musical theory, the great technical differences between the elder and our cotemporaneous styles, and will explain the greatly different effects we experience from music written in the one style or the other.

I once felt, let me repeat, that it was desirable for Church music to be written exclusively in the ancient diatonic style; and this feeling—for it was something stronger in me than mere opinion—was grounded on the idea that whatever was designed

for Church use should be distinguished in every essential from all that had general acceptance outside the sacred precincts. I thought not, when I held this view, of the identity of style that has prevailed, in all stages of Church and musical history since the Reformation, between sacred and secular music; or, if I thought of this, I either disregarded it, or considered that a distinct diversity, such as would be marked by the two separate styles above defined, would be preferable to the identity which has prevailed in every period within these last three hundred years. I reflected not then that men in church were the same human beings as the same men at home, or at market, or on the wayside. I failed to consider that folks thought in the same language, felt from like impulses, acted from similar emotions, whether they were in one place or another, whether they interchanged ideas with their fellows or addressed themselves to a higher being. I overlooked the profound truth, that, to be sincere, one must be natural; and that thus, whatever is assumed, if of form of speech or of melodious tones in which to declaim it, is unnatural, artificial therefore, and consequently false. We hear and we repeat the long-standing, time-honoured forms of prayer that constitute our English Liturgy; and the use of the antiquated diction of which these are composed involves no insincerity, because its constancy removes all strangeness from those peculiar turns of speech that would sound quaint, odd, and bordering even upon comical, if we met with them in unfamiliar places; this use, so long established, is indeed to us a second nature. Just the same is true of those musical compositions which are regarded as classics of the English Church; we hear them so often, and we revere them so profoundly whenever we hear, that they move us in a manner undistinguishable from that in which we are touched by the texts these pieces illustrate. The literary and the musical idiom of the passages in question was natural to their writers, and long-ruling custom makes us experience from it the natural and therefore truthful effect that it wrought upon the men who naturally employed it. Totally otherwise would be the effect upon us were a living preacher to scatter his discourse with the all but obsolete words that are of frequent occurrence in the English version of the Bible; and uncouthly as these would fall upon the ear if intermixed with the colloquialisms of our own time, stilted and unnatural as would appear the language into which they were artificially strained, just so uncouth, just so stilted must sound music which, in like manner, is written against the grain of the composer's unsophisticated growth of thought. There are now many admirable musicians who have excellent fluency in the use of the idiom of the present day, but are comparatively little skilled in that of any bygone age, and owe any readiness in this which they may possess rather to a faculty for imitating familiar works, than to a knowledge of the principles whereon these works were constructed. It is not too much to presume that the living musicians are most rare who have such complete familiarity, not with the rules of counterpoint only, but with their practical application, as may enable them to think easily, unrestrainedly, wholly without seeking for unaccustomed phrases, wholly without distorting their spontaneous ideas into the shapes of other days, in the idiom of the diatonic style. Even they who have so fully mastered the peculiarities of contrapuntal writing—whereby I mean, not necessarily imitative, but restricted by

the principles I have epitomised—that they can practise this style of Art with as much facility as a scholar writes or speaks in a foreign language; even they find it and show it to be still foreign, and cannot but sometimes betray, by a slight accent or an unwonted expression, that they are not native born to its manner. I therefore unreservedly recant my once firm opinion that the strict diatonic style of the contrapuntal masters only should be employed for the music of the sanctuary, being convinced that sincere feelings must have their faithful utterance in unrestrained expression, and being confident that the truthfulness of the composers must impart itself to the listeners. While, however, I would leave it freely open to every musician who wrote for the Church, to write in such style as was most easy and so most natural to him, I would certainly include in this broad range of styles, that which I have classed as the diatonic, whenever the education, the taste, the versatility, and the feeling of the moment enabled a composer sincerely to employ it; but, in my own case, I should esteem this inclusion rather as a privilege than as a restriction.

Thus much has been said with reference mainly to what may be named the technical conscience of a musician, whose art practices should go ever hand in hand with his intuitive impulses. A greatly different consideration prompts what I have now to urge. The rapid passages frequent in modern music, the quickly changing harmonies, and, very far more, the chromatic element which strongly characterizes the writing of the day, is all but incompatible with good, and unquestionably so with grand effect, in buildings of the form and proportions of our cathedrals. Further than this, these features are, I think, equally incompatible with the loftiest musical expression. I have owned that to insure his truth, every composer for the Church should write what education and feeling make most natural to him; but I still think that no one should compose for the Church whom study and nature had not fitted with high aspirations and with high thoughts for the production of grand and solemn, if not sublime effects.

(To be continued.)

THE growth of the *Musical Times* has been so gradual, and its publication has extended over so many years that few persons, perhaps, may recollect its modest first appearance, with only eight pages, including the advertisements. Devoted, however, to the best interests of choral Societies (the formation of which the issue of cheap music by Messrs. Novello had so materially assisted), it shortly assumed an importance which justified the proprietors in enlarging it to twelve, then to sixteen, and afterwards to twenty, pages. As the increase of size was solely attributable to the increase of matter, it was scarcely likely that, even in its enlarged state, it could long remain stationary. The necessity of rendering it an efficient musical review, whilst still maintaining its character of "Singing-class Circular;" the insertion of original articles upon the art, critical notices of the best musical literature; and above all, the pressure of advertisements, made such constantly increasing demand upon its space that many of the latter numbers have appeared with twenty-four pages. That all these great changes have been effected without any alteration in the unprecedentedly low price of the journal may be accounted for by the desire of the proprietors